

“The Advent of Joy”

December 11, 2011

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4; I Thessalonians 5:16-24

The words from Isaiah are familiar ones. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.” That announcement of good news, of the gospel, is echoed hundreds of years later, according to Luke’s Gospel, in a small synagogue in Nazareth by Jesus as he begins his ministry. That’s not an accident. Jesus identifies with the message of Isaiah, and all the gospel writers make the same connection.

So what is it about this prophet that’s so important? I mentioned last week that Isaiah prophesied at a time when Israel was at its lowest. We don’t know for sure whether at the point these words are spoken Israel is still in exile in Babylon or has just been given permission to return by the new superpower of Persia, but either way it is a time of misery and injustice. What they see when they look around is a system rigged against them. They see a system designed to protect the strong and to keep the weak dependent.

Now in those days it was not unusual for such blatant injustice to exist. Many of the cultures around Israel were designed that way and did not consider it unjust. Cultures like Babylon or Assyria or Egypt or Persia were built on an understanding of the universe rooted in religious systems that worshiped power and regarded the domination of the strong over the weak as the natural order of things. So a voice like Isaiah’s bringing a word of justice defined as disrupting that order was rare and profoundly welcome.

Isaiah proclaims “the year of the Lord’s favor.” That’s sort of a code. It refers to a practice described in Leviticus, a part of the Torah, requiring every fifty years for society to observe a Jubilee. The word “jubilee” in Hebrew means literally “time of shouting” or “rejoicing.” It was a time when all debts were cancelled, all property returned to original owners, when every relationship of economic domination was set right again. Every fifty years this was to happen, once a generation. It was meant to prevent a perpetual state of servitude and poverty to exist among God’s people.

You can see what a contrast that sort of vision was compared to all the other societies around Israel. Historically there’s evidence of other cultures declaring cancellation of debts, but usually it was done at the change of a regime as a way of currying the favor of the masses, and it was a rarity. But in Israel Jubilee was no gimmick. That practice was a foundational element of Israel’s identity as a society. Justice for the weak and the vulnerable lies at the core of what it means to be God’s chosen.

And even though it may not always have been practiced perfectly, justice for the vulnerable and the weak remained a way of measuring the righteousness of Israel’s leaders. A lot of the prophets talk that way, but Isaiah makes it especially clear: God is more interested in justice than in piety. What I find so striking about Isaiah’s words here is their concreteness. He’s not calling for a spiritual awakening. Or, better, any spiritual awakening will be revealed

through concrete changes in relationships that lead to justice for the oppressed, healing for victims, and release of prisoners.

Those hopes are carried over into Jesus' ministry and continue to be felt by the early Christians. When Paul writes the Thessalonian Christians, people who are troubled because Jesus has yet to return in glory, he encourages them to be observant of what's happening around them. They're not to hide themselves away and be disengaged from the world. They're to practice justice and care among themselves and in the world, holding fast to what is good and rejecting what is evil. And through it all they are to rejoice constantly and give thanks for everything.

That's not the easiest attitude to adopt in our world. We see the depth of poverty that exists in our country and in other countries in the world and it can cause us to despair of any hope for change. The injustices in our world are so immense and the systems at work are so complex that we can be overwhelmed. It's so much easier to just hide our heads under the covers and wish it all away. But if Isaiah is any example, injustice has been a reality forever. And the God whose arrival we're preparing ourselves for has longed for an end to injustice forever.

And if there's one thing scripture teaches us it is that God gets what God wants. And Jesus' birth is the beginning of the end of injustice. So while Advent is a time to condition and prepare our spirits to receive Jesus in our lives, it is also a time to be observant of the world around us and to respond to the injustice we see. The joy that we anticipate at Advent, the joy of Jesus' birth, is reflected in our participating in God's purposes, participating in bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, binding up the broken-hearted. Justice and joy go hand in hand.

So as we look forward to the spiritual renewal of Christmas through prayer and praise, we also look around and engage in practices that invite the renewal of relationships between ourselves and people who are weak or vulnerable. The advent of joy is the promise of justice because Jesus comes to set things right, "to give a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit...The One who calls us is faithful and will do this."

Amen